

Bob Dylan as Dylan

Part 3 of 3

Bob Dylan
Paul Jay Robbins

1966

Dylan, eyebrows up and lids down, spoke in intense staccato. He'd throw words out in rhythmic phrases, testing the articulation of his thought by speaking it. He would smoke distractedly, bob his knee as if dandling a kid, and diddle with his fingers...continually nervous. We'd been introduced by mutual friends and the talk had been straight and communicative for an hour or so. His nervousness wasn't irritation, it was restlessness. Dylan is a quester, a grower, a doer; and growth is a nonsleep engagement.

Off and on, during breaks and lulls, he'd negotiate a few licks and changes on his guitar; he had a concert that night. The discussion continued.

Robbins: A local disc jockey, Les Claypool, went through a whole thing on you one night, just couldn't get out of it. For maybe 45 minutes, he'd play a side of yours and then an ethnic side in which it was demonstrated that both melodies were the same. After each pair he'd say, "Well, you see what's happening...This kid is taking other people's melodies; he's not all that original. Not only that," he'd say, "but his songs are totally depressing and have no hope."

Dylan: Who's Les Claypool?

R: A folk jockey out here who has a long folk show on Saturday nights and an hour one each night, during which he plays highly ethnic sides.

D: He played THOSE songs? He didn't play anything hopeful?

R: No, he was loading it to make his point. Anyway, it brings up an expected question: why do you use melodies that are already written?

D: I used to do that, when I was more or less in folk. I knew the melodies, they were already there. I did it because I liked the melodies. I did it when I really wasn't that popular and the songs weren't reaching that many people, and everybody around dug it. Man, I never introduced a song, "Here's the song I've stole the melody from, someplace." For me it wasn't that important; still isn't that important. I don't care about the melodies, man; the melodies are all traditional anyway. And if anybody wants to pick that out and say, "That's Bob Dylan," that's their thing, not mine. I mean, if they want to think that. Anybody with any sense at all, man; he says that I haven't any hope... Hey, I got FAITH. I know that there are people who're going to know that's total bullshit. I know the cat is just up tight. He hasn't really gotten into a good day and he has to pick on something. Groovy. He has to pick on me? Hey, if he can't pick on me, he picks on someone else. It don't matter. He doesn't step on me, 'cause I don't care. He's not coming up to me on the street and stepping on my head, man. Hey, I've only done that with very few of my songs, anyway. And then when I don't do it, everybody says they're rock & roll melodies. You can't satisfy the people—you just can't. You got to know, man: they just don't care about it.

R: Why is rock & roll coming in and folk music going out?

D: Folk music destroyed itself. Nobody destroyed it. Folk music is still here, it's always going to be here, if you want to dig it. It's not that it's going in or out. it's all the soft mellow shit, man, that's just being replaced by some-

thing people know is there now. Hey, you must've heard rock & roll long before the Beatles, you must've discarded rock & roll around 1960. I did that in 1957. I couldn't make it as a rock & roll singer then. There was too many groups. I used to play piano. I made some records, too.

R: Okay. You've got a lot of bread now. And your way of life isn't like it was four or five years ago. It's much grander. Does that kind of thing tend to throw you off?

D: Well, the transition never came from working at it. I left where I'm from because there's nothing there. I come from Minnesota; there was nothing there. I'm not going to fake it and say I went out to see the world or I went out to conquer the world. Hey, when I left there, man, I knew one thing: I had to get out of there and not come back. Just from my senses I knew there was something more than Walt Disney movies. I was never turned on or off by money. I never considered the fact of money as anything really important. I could 'always play the guitar, you dig, and make friends—or fake friends. A lot of other people do other things and get to eat and sleep that way. Lot of people do a lot of things just to get around. You can find cats who get very scared, right? Who get married and settle down. But, after somebody's got something and sees it all around him, so he doesn't have to sleep out in the cold at night, that's all. The only thing is he don't die. But is he happy? There's nowhere to go. Okay, so I get the money, right? First of all, I had to move out of New York. Because everybody was coming down to see me—people which I didn't really dig. People coming in from weird-ass places. And I would think, for some reason, that I had to give them someplace to stay and all that. I found myself not really being by myself but just staying out of things I wanted to go to because people I knew would go there.

R: Do you find friends—real friends—are they recognizable anymore?

D: Oh, sure, man, I can tell somebody I dig right away. I don't have to go through anything with anybody. I'm just lucky that way.

R: Back to Protest Songs. The IWW's work is over now and the unions are pretty well established. What about the civil rights movement?

D: Well, it's okay now. It's proper. It's not "Commie" anymore. Harper's Bazaar can feature it, you can find it on the cover of Life. But when you get beneath it, like anything, you find there's bullshit tied up in it. The Negro Civil Rights Movement is proper now, but there's more to it than what's in Harper's Bazaar. There's more to it than picketing in Selma, right? There's people living in utter poverty in New York. And then again, you have this big Right to Vote. Which is groovy. You want all these Negroes to vote? Okay. I can't go over the boat and shout, "Hallelujah!" only because they want to vote. Who're they going to vote for? Just politicians; same as the white people put in their politicians. Anybody that wants to get into politics is a little greaky [sic] anyway. Hey, they're just going to vote, that's all they're going to do. I hate to say it like that, make it sound hard, but it's going to boil down to that.

R: What about the drive for education?

D: Education? They're going to school and learn about all the things the white private schools teach. The catechism, the whole thing. What are they going to learn? What's this education? Hey, the cat's much better off never going to school. The only thing against him is he can't be a doctor or a judge. Or he can't get a good job with the salesman's company. But that's the only thing wrong. If you want to say it's good that he gets an education and goes out and gets a job like that, groovy. I'm not going to do it.

R: In other words, the formal intake of factual knowledge...

D: Hey, I have no respect for factual knowledge, man. I don't care what anybody knows, I don't care if somebody's a living encyclopedia. Does that make him nice to talk to? Who cares if Washington was even the first president of the United States? You think anybody has actually ever been helped with this kind of knowledge?

R: Maybe through a test. Well, what's the answer?

D: There aren't any answers, man. Or any questions. You must read my book...there's a little part in there about that. It evolves into a thing where it mentions words like "Answer." I couldn't possibly rattle off the words I use for these, because you'd have to read the whole book to see why I use these specific words for Question and Answer. We'll have another interview after you read the book.

R: Yeah, you have a book coming out. What about it? The title?

D: Tentatively, "Bob Dylan Off the Record." But they tell me, there's already books out with that "off the record" title. The book can't really be titled, that's the kind of book it is. I'm also going to write the reviews for it.

R: Why write a book instead of lyrics?

D: I've written some songs which are kind of far out, a long continuation of verses, stuff like that—but I haven't really gotten into writing a completely free song. Hey, you dig something like cut-ups? I mean, like William Burroughs?

R: Yeah. There's a cat in Paris who published a book with no pagination. The book comes in a box and you throw it in the air and, however it lands, you read it like that.

D: Yeah, that's where it's at. Because that's what it means, anyway. Okay, I wrote the book because there's a lot of stuff in there which I can't possibly sing...all the collages. I can't sing it because it gets too long or it goes too far out. I can only do it around a few people who would know. Because the majority of the audience—I don't care where they're from, how hip they are—I think it would just get totally lost. Something that had no rhyme, all cut up, no nothing, except something happening which is words.

R: You wrote the book to say something?

D: Yeah, but certainly not any kind of profound statement. The book don't begin or end.

R: But you had something to say. And you wanted to say it to somebody.

D: Yeah, I said it to myself. Only I'm lucky, because I could put it into a book. Now somebody else is going to be allowed to see what I said to myself.

R: You have four albums out now, with a fifth any day. Are these albums sequential in the way that you composed and sung them?

D: Yeah. I've got about two or three albums that I've never recorded, which are lost songs. They're old songs; I'll never record them. Some very groovy songs. Some old songs which I've written and sung maybe once in a concert and nobody else ever heard them. There are a lot of songs which could fill in between the records. It was growing from the first record to the second, then a head change on the third. And the fourth. The fifth I can't even tell you about.

R: So if I started with Album One, Side One, Band One, I could truthfully watch Bob Dylan grow?

D: No, you could watch Bob Dylan laughing to himself. Or you could see Bob Dylan going through changes. That's really the most.

R: What do you think of the Byrds? Do you think they're doing something different?

D: Yeah, they could. They're doing something really new now. It's like a danceable Bach sound. Like "Bells of Rhymney." They're cutting across all kinds of barriers which most people who sing aren't even hip to. They know it all. If they don't close their minds, they'll come up with something pretty fantastic.

The interview part was over. I stayed in the hotel room until we all left for the concert at which point he asked me if I wanted his guitar case. Since my cardboard case had long since fallen in, I took his. After the concert, we stopped back in his room before going to a party at his agents'. There he gave me two or three bottles of wine. It wasn't Bob Dylan handing out souvenirs or some sort of useable autograph, it was merely that he had something which he didn't necessarily need which I could use.

When we left the concert, he insisted someone was following us and I felt this touch of paranoia to be a bit curious—until we actually discovered a car definitely following. There were also the groovy open friendly faces at the stage entrance when we went into the concert hall—hippies who wanted to get in free. Dylan said no and it also struck me as curious—until I realized what a continual Give is demanded of him, even by those who should know enough to make their own scenes.

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